

Testimony of the Honorable Richard Cortez
Mayor of McAllen, Texas
before the
House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security
Using Resources Effectively to Secure Our Border at Ports of Entry –
Stopping the Illicit Flow of Money, Guns and Drugs
April 5, 2011

Chairwoman Miller, Ranking Member Cuellar, committee members: thank you for this opportunity to share my views on how to secure the border.

Without a strong and growing economy on the border, we cannot have a growing national economy or achieve our security goals. Trade directly generates one-third of the U.S. economy. Land ports of entry are responsible for more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars in trade annually with Canada and Mexico.

On the southwest border, we need to assure that our economic climate not only helps fund the security measures we need, but also provides opportunity to the people in the region so they become part of the solution and are not tempted to become part of the problem.

To achieve our economic security, we need well-built, well-equipped and well-staffed ports of entry that can facilitate legitimate trade and travel and interdict lawbreakers.

We are grateful that Senators Cornyn, Graham, Kyl and Feinstein have asked the Senate Judiciary Committee to hold a hearing on U.S. Ports of Entry and infrastructure on the Southern Border.

We have an imbalance of investment and results on the border. Since 1993, we have increased our investment 800 percent in Border Patrol personnel, mobility, communications and technology. That effort between the ports has been successful; the Border Patrol intercepts 70 percent of lawbreakers across the border; in the El Paso sector, the success rate is 90 percent.

In contrast, we have let the land ports of entry fall into disrepair. We currently have ports like the McAllen Hidalgo-Reynosa POE in which the electrical grid is outdated and the infrastructure is antiquated at a time when the most advanced technology and infrastructure is needed to secure our borders. Over the same

period, the land ports budget has risen only 17 percent and our ability to intercept criminals only 28 percent of the time.

That bears repeating. Between the ports, we catch the criminals 70 percent of the time. At the ports, we catch them less than 30 percent. That is an imbalance Congress must help to correct.

The criminal cartels are exploiting our weakness. According to the Department of Justice, 90 percent of the drugs smuggled into the US enter through the land ports. The physical bulk cash that exits goes exclusively through the ports. There is no data on firearms, but anecdotally, the ports are where they too traverse the border.

To achieve our economic security, we need well-built, equipped and staffed ports of entry that can both facilitate legitimate trade and travel and interdict lawbreakers. We need those improvements for our national security, as well.

Rich Stana at the Government Accountability Office estimates we need 6,000 new inspection personnel and more than \$5 billion to bring the facilities up to snuff. We don't expect you to wave a fiscal wand and achieve this overnight. I do not advocate taking anything away from the Border Patrol. But if there are additional resources to be allocated, this year or next year, they should go to the ports of entry as a first priority.

Secure and efficient ports of entry are very important to cities like McAllen. They create jobs, sustain our economy and improve our quality of life. They expedite legitimate trade and traffic to flow across our border and in our case, contribute to McAllen's \$3 billion retail industry. Without federal-local coordination, efforts to simultaneously secure ports and make them more efficient will not be possible.

For example, it makes no sense to have an international bridge where commercial truck traffic is not allowed to cross. Right now the truck industry is moving away from crossing through the Nogales Port in Arizona to our Ports in South Texas. This makes it necessary to increase our capacity to serve this new traffic. We cannot do that if some of our bridges cannot accept commercial truck traffic like our Anzalduas Bridge in McAllen. Our presidential permit states that a south-bound commercial truck facility should have been operational prior to us opening the Anzalduas International Bridge.

However, we also have no south-bound commercial truck traffic. Please help us expedite that and allow us to better serve our area businesses.

Year 2015 is just around the corner and we have no funding in place for the construction of a north-bound commercial traffic facility at the Anzalduas International Bridge.

While our legal ports of entry have a positive effect on our commerce, they have a negative effect on our border communities because persons illegally in the U.S. commit crimes in our cities and then they try and make their run back into Mexico.

One example would be what we experienced in 2010. Around 9:30 p.m., closing time, in one of our busiest shopping intersections, four (4) suspects, all males from the State of Guerrero, Mexico and connected to drug activity and illegally in our country shot and killed another person. The victim was also a male from Mexico. He was shot twelve (12) times. All four suspects then simply boarded their vehicles and raced to Mexico. In this case we were very lucky that we were able to apprehend them just short of the port of exit. Currently, there is no communication system which allows us to alert our Port of Entry of what is approaching or leaving the port.

Drug trafficking is nothing new in our area. During 2009/2010 our officers seized:

- 75,000 pounds of marijuana
- 2,000 pounds of cocaine and
- 350 pounds of crystal myth

Whereas before it was rare, today it seems to occur more frequent.

In a recent arrest, our officers seized 12,000 pounds of marijuana, 150 pounds of cocaine, one (1) 70 caliber machine gun, two (2) military issue flak jackets, two (2) hand grenades, six (6) semi-automatic weapons and 1,800 pounds of assault rifle ammunition. Eleven (11) persons were arrested including a Texas National Guardsman.

We are in an area of many political jurisdictions. We need a Border Financial Crime Task Force with personnel to provide intelligence and surveillance. It needs to be well connected with all of our law enforcement agencies. We must deter the idea that persons can simply run backundetected to Mexico after committing crimes here. We need uniformed south bound checks at all ports of entry specifically looking for fire arms and cash.

Thank you for allowing me to share this information with you, and on behalf of all our citizens, we thank you for your service to our country.